

# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



**Gridley J. F. Bryant**  
1816-1899

Gridley J. F. Bryant, the great Boston mercantile architect who presided over the largest architectural office in New England at the height of his career in the middle of the nineteenth century, was no stranger to the state of Maine. Educated at the Gardiner Lyceum, one of America's first technical schools where young mechanics were given a "scientific education", Bryant returned to design at least twenty buildings, not to mention unexecuted projects. From Alfred to Machias, the enterprising architect built schools, jails, courthouses, and business blocks which today are for the most part intact. His buildings were not stylistically innovative. In fact, as a contemporary observed, they were "without the least useless expenditure of architectural whim."<sup>1</sup> Sober, chaste, functional buildings were Bryant's forte. Modern, if not advanced, in terms of their mechanical systems and ventilation, they were usually designed in a single architectural mode, the Italianate.

Born in 1816, the son of the famous civil engineer and railroad pioneer Gridley Bryant, the young mechanic received his architectural training in the office of Alexander Parris and Loammi Baldwin in the 1830s. On his own by 1837, Bryant's practice was well underway when he received his first Maine commissions in 1850 for the United States Custom House in



Figure 1. Maine State Reform School, South Portland, 1872 view (MHPC).



Figure 2. Androscoggin County Courthouse and Jail, Auburn, c. 1875 view (MHPC).



Figure 3. Kennebec County Jail, Augusta, c. 1875 view (MHPC).

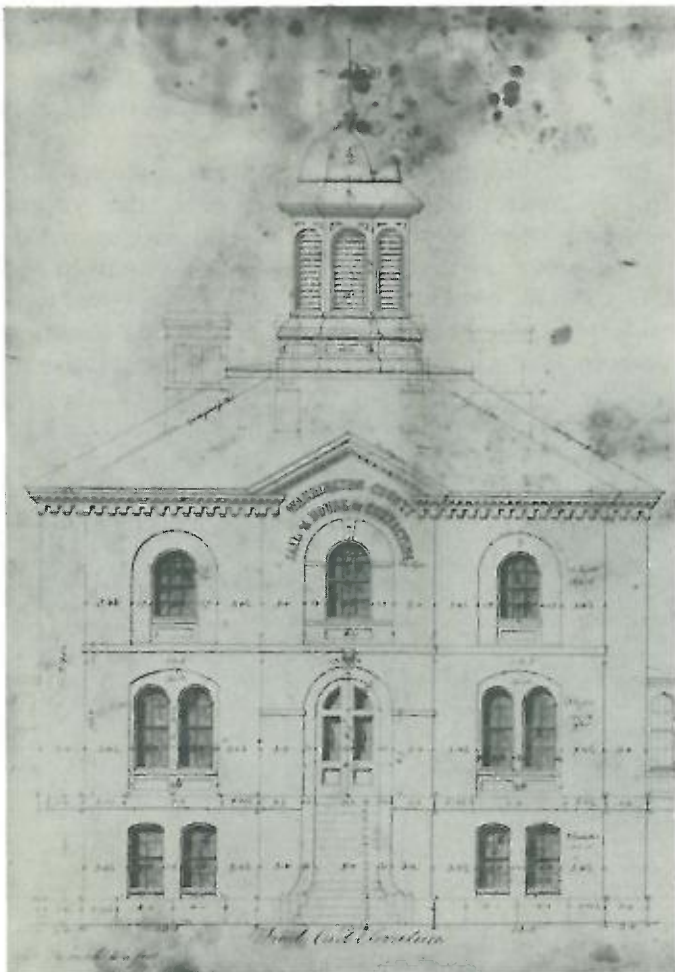


Figure 4. Elevation of Washington County Jail, Machias, 1858 drawing (Courtesy Washington County Commissioners, Machias).

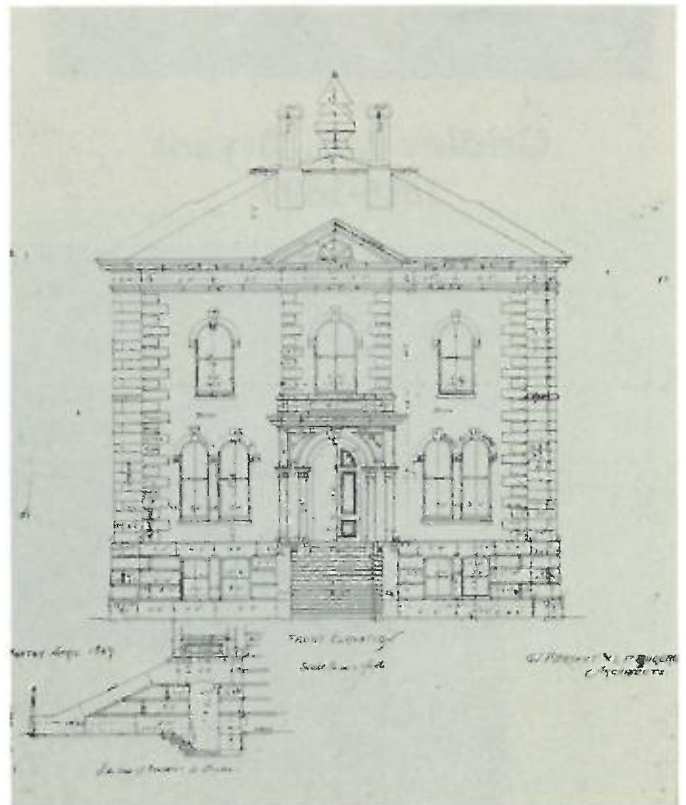


Figure 5. Elevation of Penobscot County Jail, Bangor, 1869 drawing (Courtesy Penobscot County Commissioner, Bangor).



Eastport (a handsome brick Italianate building which burned in the fire of 1886) and the State Reform School at Cape Elizabeth (now South Portland) (Figure 1). The latter was to help establish Bryant's reputation as an architect of correctional institutions in Maine and lead to six jail commissions and projects around the state over the next two decades.

Bryant owed these commissions to the success of his Charles Street Jail (1848-52) in Boston, a seminal cruciform plan prison designed in conjunction with the Rev. Louis Dwight, a penal reformer who was secretary of the Prison Discipline Society of Boston. Following a visit to the Massachusetts "Reform School at Westboro and several other institutions", the Maine state commissioners appointed to build the reform school examined several plans and selected, according to Dwight, one that was at once "simply, convenient, appropriate and beautiful."<sup>2</sup> The construction of the large brick and granite structure, an unusual foray for Bryant into the Romanesque mode, had commenced by the summer of 1851.

Two 45 by 70 foot inmate wings and one for the superintendent measuring 41 by 45 feet radiated from a central octagon which was 68 feet in diameter. The octagon, which contained most of the service functions, had bathing, washing and kitchen facilities in the basement with sliding door school rooms, work rooms and a hospital at the first, second, and third floor levels respectively. The arched windows, chimneys, six stair towers, and belvedere juxtaposed with the gable peaks must have created a picturesque or horrific appearance to nineteenth century Portlanders, depending on one's age.

Bryant was to design an even more ambitious cruciform with inside cell blocks on the Charles Street plan and radiating workshops within the prison yard in 1858 for James G. Blaine, who had been appointed by the Governor to examine the Maine State Prison at Thomaston to see whether the facility could be made self-supporting. After visiting fifteen prisons and interviewing dozens of penologists, including Dorothea Dix, Blaine concluded that the Thomaston facility was poorly managed with respect to convict labor, contract rates, purchasing and construction, and had no rail connection. Thus, Blaine argued that a new site was required for labor as well as adequate transportation links. His model prison report to which Bryant's plan was appended was never acted upon. However, the following year Bryant was retained to make improvements and additions to the Thomaston prison.

For Maine's county jails where the inmate population rarely exceeded several dozen, another solution was required. Drawing on the experience of his late partner, Louis Dwight, Bryant addressed this problem in the 1850s. His county buildings complex for Androscoggin at Auburn in 1857-7 neatly integrated a courthouse and a jail into a corner lot (Figure 2). The jail was based on the Hartford, Connecticut County Jail of 1836-7, which Dwight had considered a model small "Auburn System" (inside cellblock) facility. New inno-

ventions abounded, however, at the Auburn Jail where Bryant included speaking tubes, a bell system, self-locking doors, cast iron eyelets for peering into the cell block, cast iron basement windows supplied by James Bucklin of Providence, improved spatial arrangements, and a state of the art ventilation system utilizing Emerson's rooftop ventilators. Stylistically, the handsome brick complex on its high granite foundation was typical of the Bryant office's facade treatments at this time, which featured corbelled corners and piers separated by recessed window bays. An Italianate portico, a virtual hallmark of Bryant design, graced the courthouse entrance.

As might be expected, when the Kennebec County Commissioners began to consider a new jail for Augusta in 1857, they travelled to Auburn to see the new facility under construction there and to speak to the architect. The meeting resulted in Bryant's most important, though controversial, small county jail commission (Figure 3). Built entirely of granite at an additional cost of \$6,000 (total \$52,287),<sup>3</sup> the impressive 112 by 58 foot structure was once mistaken by Senator Stephen A. Douglass for the State Capitol and criticized as an example of unnecessary lavishness by the noted penologists E. C. Wines and Theodore W. Dwight in their famous 1867 study on the reformatories and prisons of North America.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Augusta became Bryant's model small jail design and was published in a number of state reports including, ironically, that of Wines and Dwight, who added the notation "the best yet submitted to the inspection of the public,"<sup>5</sup> Divided into three sections with each division reflected in the exterior fenestration, the Augusta prison was comprised of the jailor's quarters in front, followed by a guard room and cellblock. The following year, Bryant repeated the design for Washington County (Figure 4), *The Machias Union* of January 12, 1858 reporting that:

By call of the Commissioners, quite a large number of gentlemen, including some of the largest tax-payers in the County, assembled at the court room in this place, on Wednesday evening last to consider the propriety of erecting a new jail building.

The Chairman of the Board, John Kilby, Esq., made some statements relative to recent examinations made by the Commissioners of the jails at Bangor, Belfast, Auburn, and one in process of building at Augusta, and submitted two plans drawn by Mr. Bryant, the well-known, Boston architect, and specifications of each, with an estimate of the probable cost. These plans embraced all the modern improvements, combining safety, durability, convenience, light, ventilation, and not overlooking the external architectural feature, which everyone must admire in comparison with the dreary, desolate looking heap of stone and wood, now used for the confinement of criminals.

The whole matter of expense and ability to meet it was discussed, and after due consideration it was agreed that humanity required of the County a better building; that the County was able and ought to build it, and a vote was passed, unanimously we believe, instructing the Commissioners to proceed as fast as practicable with its erection, at an expense, not exceeding \$25,000.

The final Bryant jail, for Penobscot County at Bangor





Figure 6. Coburn Hall, Skowhegan, c. 1875 view (MHPC).



Figure 7. Parker and Hathorn Halls, Bates College, Lewiston, c. 1875 view (MHPC).

in 1869, was virtually identical in dimension to the pre-Civil War norm, differing in only a few particulars such as the simplified academic roof and the abandonment of the projecting pavillions for the guard room (Figure 5).

This formula approach is also seen in Bryant's business blocks, Auburn Hall at Auburn (1865) and Coburn Hall in Skowhegan (1866-68)<sup>6</sup>. Not unlike the enclosed shopping malls of the present day, mid-nineteenth century business blocks were designed as multi-purpose buildings which typically featured stores on the ground floor with one or more halls above used for public meetings, musicals and gatherings of fraternal orders. Named for Governor Abner Coburn, the largest stockholder in the Association that built it, Coburn Hall housed four businesses on the ground floor with rooms for the town selectmen, the Masons and other fraternal groups in the upper reaches (Figure 6). A large hall at the second floor level was the building's major attraction, *The Somerset Reporter* noting on June 12, 1868 that:

The elegant hall was occupied for the first time last Monday evening by Buckley's Troupe. Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon those who have done so much to give the town the best hall on the Kennebec River. The hall is 62 feet by 100 feet including the stage and 62 by 80 outside of it. There are galleries on three sides and it will comfortably seat 1200 people.<sup>7</sup>

Educational facilities, another specialty of the Bryant office, were also among the Boston architect's Maine commissions. They ranged from the Abbott Family School in Farmington, a small wood frame building, to imposing Hathorn Hall (1857), the Bates College administration building. Bryant's expertise in scholastic design had been established through a series of Boston area school commissions in the 1840s. Henry Barnard had included several of Bryant's designs in the 1849 edition of his seminal study.<sup>8</sup> When some "disaffected" students burned down Fryeburg Academy in 1851, Bryant was retained to prepare plans for a two story brick schoolhouse. Dedicated in 1853, the handsome building exhibited paired windows with granite cornices similar to those used at the State Reform School three years earlier.

Some of Bryant's most interesting work was done for institutions of higher learning, and his buildings still grace the campuses of Tufts, Wesleyan and Wheaton. In Maine, for the Maine State Seminary at Lewiston, now Bates College, he designed Parker Hall (1857), a dormitory and Hathorn, the administration building (Figure 7). Historian Bryant F. Tolles, Jr., has called the Lewiston complex, which was to have included a third building, "an early and rare attempt at planning the entire campus" which "possessed the potential of being New England's finest collegiate building group for its time."<sup>9</sup> Time has altered Parker Hall, but Hathorn survives uncompromised, exhibiting the rectangular plan, hipped roof, tripartite facade, and huge lantern which were the hallmarks of Bryant's public buildings. The principal entrance was at one end of the building under a colossal portico similar to one

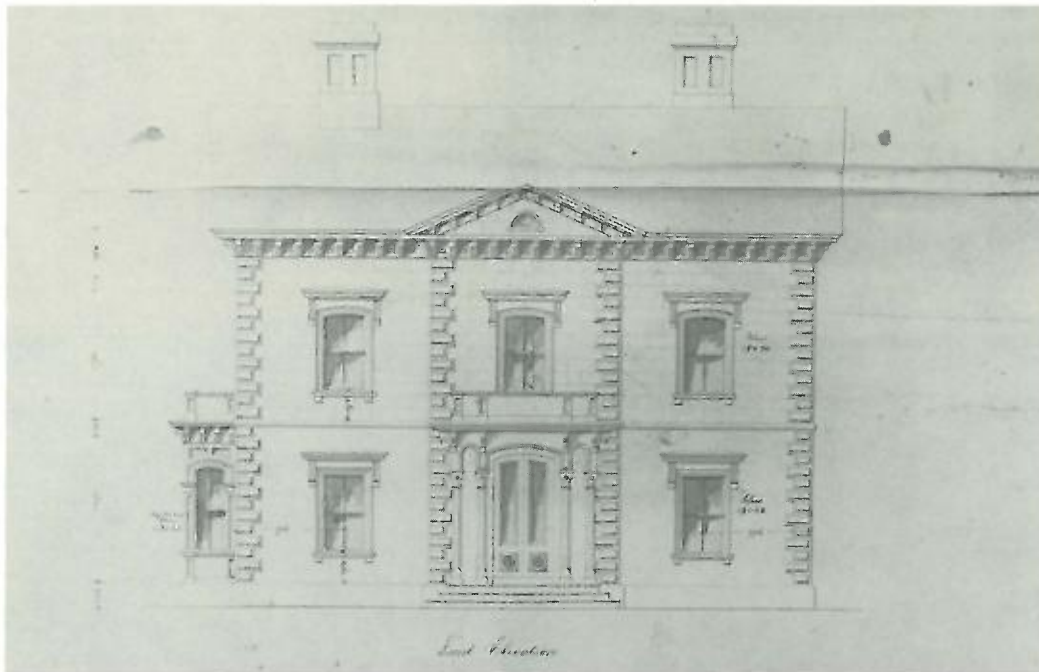


Figure 8. Elevation of Joseph Titcomb House, Kennebunk, 1854 drawing (Courtesy Brick Store Museum, Kennebunk).

he had used at Tufts. Remarkably different in appearance was the architect's Cony High School of 1880 in Augusta with its half-timbered gables and tower modelled after the Queen Ann style work of the English architect Richard Norman Shaw. One of the last recorded commissions of the Bryant office (by then Bryant and Rogers), it is doubtful that the aging architect had much of a hand in its design.

Plans and partial working drawings survive for many of Bryant's Maine building, more, in fact, than can be found for his out-of-state buildings collectively. Included in these plans are the designs for his only Maine domestic commission, the Kennebunk residence of banker Joseph Titcomb (Figure 8). Drawn in 1854, the plans depict a building that is a virtual lexicon of the Italian Renaissance motifs favored by Bryant. The tripartite facade with its projecting central pavilion porch, quoins and academic window treatments assured that Mr. Titcomb possessed one of the most *derigueur* domiciles in the state. Bryant also supplied plans for a never executed addition to the Kennebec County Courthouse in 1857 mirroring the existing structure and for a proposed 1867 remodelling of the State House, which was designed in conjunction with Louis P. Rogers, his partner in the latter years of his practice.

Among his most impressive Maine edifices are the county courthouses for Aroostook at Houlton (1859) and Knox at Rockland (with Rogers, 1874-75) (Figure 9). The first, a free-standing sequel to Auburn, and the three-story Rockland landmark are both extant, a fact which would please Bryant, who outlived his generation and had the misfortune of seeing many of his buildings demolished. "What is fame in architecture in these latter days?" Bryant wrote in 1894, "to witness the demolition or radical remodelling of an architect's

work, with less than a third of a century of real usefulness about it?"<sup>10</sup> In Maine, at least, the usefulness of Bryant's handsome buildings continues to this day. The structures are testaments to a career in architecture based on Andrea Palladio's sixteenth century dictum that to be commended a building must be designed with three considerations, "utility or convenience, duration and beauty."<sup>11</sup>

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Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities  
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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ballou's *Pictorial Drawing Room, Companion*, Boston, 1857, Vol. 12, p. 12.
- <sup>2</sup> *Twenty-sixth Annual Report of The Board of Managers of the Prison Discipline Society of Boston*, Boston, 1851.
- <sup>3</sup> James W. North, *The History of Augusta*, August, 1870, p. 708.
- <sup>4</sup> Theodore W. Dwight and E. C. Wines, *Report on the Prisons and Reformatories of the United States and Canada made to the Legislature of New York*, Albany, 1867, pp. 108-9.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> Bryant is believed to be the first architect in New England to use printed specifications.
- <sup>7</sup> Louise Helen Coburn, *Skowhegan on the Kennebec*, Skowhegan, 1941, p. 255.
- <sup>8</sup> Henry Barnard, *School Architecture*, New York, 1849.
- <sup>9</sup> Bryant F. Tolles, Jr., "College Architecture in New England before 1860 in Printed and Sketched Views", *Antiques*, March, 1973, pp. 502-9.
- <sup>10</sup> Henry Turner Bailey, "An Architect of the Old School", *New England Magazine*, Vol. 25, p. 329.
- <sup>11</sup> Andrea Palladio, *Four Books of Architecture*, 1570.





Figure 9. Knox County Courthouse, Rockland, 1913 view (MHPC).

#### LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY GRIDLEY J. F. BRYANT

United States Custom House, Eastport, 1850, Destroyed.  
 Maine State Reform School, South Portland, 1850-52, Extant.  
 Fryeburg Academy, Fryeburg, 1852-53, Extant.  
 Joseph Titcomb House, Summer Street, Kennebunk, 1854, Extant.  
 Additions to York County Courthouse, Alfred, 1856, Extant.  
 Androscoggin County Courthouse and Jail, Auburn, 1856-57, Extant.  
 Proposed Addition to Kennebec County Courthouse, 1857, Not Executed.  
 Kennebec County Jail, Augusta, 1857-58, Extant.  
 Hathorn Hall, Bates College, Lewiston, 1857, Extant.  
 Parker Hall, Bates College, Lewiston, 1857, Extant.  
 Blaine State Prison Design, 1858, Not Executed.  
 Washington County Jail, Machias, 1858, Extant.  
 Additions to Maine State Prison, Thomaston, 1859, Destroyed.  
 Aroostook County Courthouse, Houlton, 1859, Extant.  
 School, Alfred, 1862, Destroyed.  
 Town Hall, Alfred, 1862, Extant.  
 Auburn Hall, Court Street, Auburn, 1865, Extant.

Coburn Hall, Skowhegan, 1866-68, Destroyed.  
 Remodel Maine State House (with Louis P. Rogers), Augusta, 1867, Not Executed.  
 Penobscot County Jail (with Louis P. Rogers), Bangor, 1869, Extant.  
 Knox County Courthouse (with Louis P. Rogers), Rockland, 1874-75, Extant.  
 Cony High School (with Louis P. Rogers), Augusta, 1880, Destroyed.  
 Abbott Family School, Farmington, Date Unknown, Destroyed.  
 Hotels at Small Point and Point Shirley, Unlocated.

#### ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

Architectural drawings for the following eight of Bryant's Maine commissions have been located: Joseph Titcomb House, Brick Store Museum; Kennebec County Courthouse Addition, Maine Historic Preservation Commission; Washington County Jail, Washington County Commissioners; Maine State Prison Additions, Maine State Library; Alfred School and Alfred Town Hall, Parsons Memorial Library; Penobscot County Jail, Penobscot County Commissioners; Knox County Courthouse, Knox County Commissioners.

Photograph of Gridley J. F. Bryant in 1881  
 from *New England Magazine*, Vol. 25, p. 333.

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